

# INTRODUCTORY 'IT' PATTERNS IN ENGLISH AND ITALIAN ACADEMIC WRITING: A CROSS-GENERIC AND CROSS-CULTURAL ANALYSIS

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## 1. *Introduction*

Biber and Finegan's (1989) work in the area of interpersonal meaning suggests that academic discourse is characterized by the relative absence of markers of stance – "the lexical and grammatical expression of attitudes, feelings, judgments, or commitment concerning the propositional content of a message" (Biber & Finegan 1989: 93). But recent research has suggested a growing recognition that there is room for negotiation of personal stance within academic writing (e.g. Hyland 1999; Bondi 2002). As noted by Hyland (1999: 120), "the use of stance is an important aspect of professional academic discourse, conveying the field-specific expressive and interpersonal meanings which help readers to evaluate information and writers to gain acceptance for their work".

As Conrad and Biber (2000) note, studies into the ways that speakers and writers mark their personal stance have been carried out from many different perspectives, i.e. from descriptions of a single text type to investigations of large computer-based corpora. Much work has been devoted to the examination of the ways indicators of stance are employed in specific disciplines (e.g. Peck McDonald 1994; Bondi 1999; Hyland 2000; Charles 2004; Samson 2004a; Diani 2006). The expression of stance has also been investigated, with several studies specifically focusing on particular lexicogrammatical elements contributing to evaluation function within and across genres (e.g. Bondi 2002; Silver 2003, 2004). However, little attention has been paid to the relationship between disciplinary and cultural variation in the expression of stance in academic discourse. One of the extremely interesting effects of such a comparative research is to contribute to understanding how far the expression of stance is influenced by national "disciplinary culture" (Hyland 2000), or by national academic culture in general. It is from these latter considerations that the present study takes its lead.

An analysis of personal stance may focus on different lexical or grammatical items (e.g. Hyland 1998; Hunston & Thompson 2000; Biber *et al.* 1999). First-person markers, for example, would be the most obvious subjective forms of authorial stance in both spoken and written academic discourse (e.g. Hyland 2001, 2002; Fortanet-Gómez 2004; Samson 2004b; Fløttum 2005; Bondi 2007a).

The focus of this paper is on a less obvious marker of personal stance. Following Francis, Manning and Hunston (1988), and Hunston and Sinclair (2000), we will

examine the introductory 'it' patterns *it v-link ADJ that-clause* and *it v-link ADJ to-inf. clause* in comparable corpora of research article openings, i.e. "the opening section up to and including the second paragraph of each article" (Silver & Bondi 2004: 121), and book review articles in English and Italian in the discipline of history<sup>1</sup>.

The context of this analysis is provided by a number of previous studies (e.g. Biber, Conrad & Reppen 1998; Biber *et al.* 1999; Charles 2000; Hewings & Hewings 2002; Murphy 2004; Groom 2005), which looked at these phraseological patterns as particularly salient in academic English. These patterns are commonly used to express evaluations, and one aspect considered here is that although they may appear to be impersonal, "in a way that allows the writer to remain in the background", as Biber *et al.* (1999: 976) put it, we understand quite well that the writer is the source of the comment. This is not a new finding: as Charles (2000: 48) points out, "although these patterns appear on the surface to be impersonal, the adjective choice opens up a space which the author can use to indicate the nature of his/her comment on what follows". And as Murphy (2004: 213) notes,

in this type of pattern the speaker does not 'assume explicit responsibility' for the attitude expressed towards the proposition that follows, so the evaluation may have an aura of objectivity about it rather than personal resonance. While the evaluation is not explicitly averred, there are nevertheless some reasons why on occasions there is no aura of objectivity around the pattern. This happens when the evaluator is modified by an adverbial [...]. Subjectivity creeps back into the text through these adverbials.

The aim of this study is to extend these observations to cross-generic and cross-cultural analysis, with a view to illuminating generic and cultural variation in the use of these phraseological patterns. Given the now significant body of work demonstrating linguistic variation within and across disciplines and genres, and given the broad consensus that such variation is not arbitrary but always rhetorically motivated (Hyland 2000), it is plausible to suppose that different genres and cultures might make differential use of these phraseological resources. It is precisely this possibility that the present study aims to investigate.

After a brief presentation of the materials and the procedures adopted for this study, we will provide a preliminary overview of the pattern/meaning associations for these patterns across genres and cultures. The overview will include a cross-cultural comparison of selected lexical elements.

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<sup>1</sup> These patterns are phraseological units in which the dummy subject pronoun *it* is followed by a link verb such as *be*, *become* or *seem*, and adjective or noun group, and a finite or non-finite *that*-clause, *to*-infinitive clause, *wh*-clause or *-ing* clause. (Francis, Manning & Hunston 1998; Hunston & Sinclair 2000). For reasons of length, only the first two patterns are discussed here.

## 2. *Materials and methods*

The analysis is based on four small specialized corpora of book review articles and research article openings, which have been designed to study academic writing in the discipline of history in different cultural contexts – English and Italian. We made use of the following corpora:

- a) a corpus of 76 HHistorical Book Review Articles in English (Engl. HIBRA) published in five British and American academic journals spanning the years 1999-2005 (consisting of 304,981 words)<sup>2</sup>.
- b) a corpus of 41 HHistorical Book Review Articles in Italian (It. HIBRA) published in three Italian academic journals spanning the years 1999-2005 (consisting of 189,346 words)<sup>3</sup>.
- c) a corpus of 280 historical research article openings in English (Eng. Openings) published in ten British and American academic journals spanning the years 1999-2000 (consisting of 95,682 words)<sup>4</sup>.
- d) a corpus of 310 historical research article openings in Italian (It. Openings) published in eight Italian academic journals spanning the years 1999-2001 (consisting of 97,513 words)<sup>5</sup>.

The corpora are of different sizes because they were originally compiled for other purposes. All frequency data reported in this paper will be presented as normalised figures, calculated per thousand words.

The two genres selected for analysis were judged suitable for present purposes as their very specific status in the field of genre studies. Keeping in mind the basically dialogic and argumentative nature of academic discourse, both the book review article and the research article represent the most distinguished channel of knowledge dissemination within the specific scientific community. Within an academic context, they play a crucial role in the process of knowledge construction and discussion by providing a forum in which academics can set out their views in the form of arguments. More specifically, focusing on the status of the research article openings in terms of the main function of the research article, Bondi (2007b: 72) sees the first two paragraphs of the research article introduction as offering “material that showed the starting point of the article, but also the direction taken, the dynamics of the beginning section of the text”. Like a book review article, a research article opening identifies a ‘research space’ for the writer’s own views within a disciplinary debate, and the creation of a research space

<sup>2</sup> The journals considered are: *Labour History Review*, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, *American Historical Review*, *Gender & History*, *Journal of American History*.

<sup>3</sup> The journals considered are: *Meridiana*, *Passato e Presente*, *Quaderni Medievali*.

<sup>4</sup> The journals considered are: *Labour History Review*, *Historical Research*, *Gender & History*, *Journal of European Ideas*, *Journal of Medieval History*, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, *Journal of Social History*, *Studies in History*, *American Quarterly*, *American Historical Review*.

<sup>5</sup> The journals considered are: *Passato e Presente*, *Quaderni Medievali*, *Il Pensiero Politico*, *Intersezioni*, *Meridiana*, *Società e Storia*, *Studi Medievali*, *Dimensioni e Problemi della Ricerca Storica*.

is realized by a variety of voices that indirectly help establish the writer's voice and construct a "niche" for his/her claims (Swales 1990).

The choice of the disciplinary area for this study – history – is linked to its position in the field of disciplinary discourses. As Bondi (2007b: 68-69) observes,

history stands out for the obvious tensions between narrative and argument in the basic structure of discourse. [...] The writer does not only interpret events: he or she also argues for his or her own position in the context of a disciplinary debate, in a complex dialogic pattern with the reader. History is not just account and interpretation of events, but also dialogic argumentation of the interpretation put forward.

The methodology adopted for this study combines a discourse and a corpus perspective. Discourse analysis contributes to the definition of pragmatic functions of introductory 'it' phraseological patterns under investigation, whereas corpus linguistics offers ways of looking at lexical patterns: in particular, using Scott (1998), we studied wordlist frequencies and concordances. These were worked out by comparing corpora to each other.

Large-scale corpus research has established that the adjectives that occur in the introductory 'it' patterns fall into broad evaluative semantic meaning groups described by Francis, Manning and Hunston (1998) as "true/untrue, likely/unlikely, obvious, good/desirable, bad/undesirable, important/necessary, interesting/surprising", and relabelled by Groom (2005) in terms of "adequacy, validity, desirability, difficulty, expectation, and importance".

Our cross-cultural comparison of evaluative adjectives in the patterns was conducted according to the evaluative semantic meaning groups indicated with the patterns in Groom (2005), who followed Francis, Manning and Hunston's (1998) categories, and are reproduced here as Table I. It should be underlined here that adjectives were not assigned to particular meaning groups on an *a priori* basis. Rather, each attested phraseological sequence (i.e. attested strings of words describable by such formulae as *it v-link ADJ that/to-inf.*) was examined by looking at the co-text. The semantic values attached to each adjective by Groom (2005) were found to be appropriate for our data as well. As space does not permit detailed analysis of all finite verbs occurring in these phraseological patterns, the discussion presented here focuses on the most frequent in the data – *is/was* – and compares it with its equivalent in Italian: *è/era*.

<i>Evaluative category</i>	<i>(Engl.) it v-link ADJ that/ (It.) verbo+AGG+che</i>	<i>(Engl.) it v-link ADJ to-inf./ (It.) verbo+AGG+infinito presente</i>
ADEQUACY	–	(Engl.) It was broad enough to incorporate ...; (It.) È opportuno precisare...
VALIDITY	(Engl.) It is possible that...; (It.) È probabile che...; È chiaro che...	(Engl.) It is quite possible to write...; (It.) È dunque possibile rivedere...
DESIRABILITY	–	(Engl.) It is fair to characterize...; (It.) È giusto continuare a riflettere...
DIFFICULTY	–	
EXPECTATION	(Engl.) It is not surprising here that...	(Engl.) It is hard to believe...; (It.) È difficile negare ...
IMPORTANCE	(Engl.) It is significant that...; (It.) È significativo che...	(Engl.) It is not therefore surprising to find...; (It.) È interessante notare...  (Engl.) It is important to look...; it is not necessary to have...; (It.) Ed è importante osservare...

Table I: A classification system of pattern/meaning associations for *it* + *is/was* + *ADJ* + *that/to-inf.* and their Italian equivalents across the corpora (based on Groom 2005).

In Table I, we see that not all the meaning groups occur in both patterns across the corpora. In particular, 'adequacy', 'desirability' and 'difficulty' are restricted to the *it v-link ADJ to-inf./verbo+AGG+infinito presente* patterns in both cultures. The fact that the *it v-link ADJ to-inf.* pattern is associated with the evaluative meaning groups 'desirability' and 'difficulty' echoes the findings by Biber *et al.* (1999: 720) in the *Longman Grammar*, who note that the most common adjectival predicates controlling extraposed *to*-clauses are (*im*)possible, difficult, hard, good, better, best, nice<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> Biber *et al.* (1999) talk of "extraposed complement clauses" rather than introductory 'it' patterns, and although they analyse and label meaning groups somewhat differently, their categories are sufficiently analogous for the above observations made.

### 3. Introductory 'it' patterns across genres and cultures: the case of *it* + *is/was* + ADJ + *that/to-inf.* and their Italian equivalents

The present analysis found significant variation in the distribution of the patterns under investigation across all four corpora. Space does not permit a full treatment of findings, so the present discussion will be restricted to dominant pattern/meaning associations for these phraseological patterns for each corpus only, and are reproduced as Table II.

Table II: Distribution of dominant pattern/meaning associations for *it* + *is/was* + ADJ + *that/to-inf.* and their Italian equivalents across the corpora (per 1,000 words).

Corpus	Dominant pattern	Dominant meaning	Occurrences per 1,000 words
HIBRA (English)	<i>It</i> v-link ADJ <i>to-inf.</i>	Difficulty	0.19
HIBRA (Italian)	verbo AGG <i>che/infinito presente</i>	Validity	0.15
Openings (English)	<i>It</i> v-link ADJ <i>that</i>	Validity	0.19
Openings (Italian)	verbo AGG <i>che/infinito presente</i>	Validity	0.14

As Table II shows, 'validity' is the dominant meaning for the patterns *it is/was ADJ that/è-era+AGG+che* in historical research article openings in both cultures. If this finding is broadly in line with expectations – in registers which construct knowledge, such as research articles, the expression of degree of certainty is important: the "certainty parameter" (Hunston & Thompson 2000: 23), defining how certain the writer is of what is to follow – the finding that 'difficulty' is the dominant meaning for the pattern *it is/was ADJ to-inf.* in English historical book review articles is somewhat more unexpected. Given the evaluative purpose of the genre, it would be reasonable to expect the 'desirability' meaning group to be prominent here, which covers the basic *good/bad* evaluative polarity. But the present data find 'desirability' to be relatively dispreferred in the corpus, only constituting a frequency of 0.07 per 1,000 words in the pattern *it is/was ADJ to-inf.* in the whole corpus. Also the 'validity' meaning is not prominent (only a frequency of 0.12 per 1,000 words in the patterns *it is/was ADJ that/to-inf.* in the whole corpus). But this is not the case of the Italian HIBRA corpus where 'validity' is the main meaning group in both phraseologies.

#### 3.1 Focus on the patterns in English and Italian historical book review articles

When considering evaluative adjectives in the dominant pattern *it is/was ADJ to-inf.* in the English HIBRA corpus, we find that the most frequent items are associated with the notion of 'difficulty' like *difficult* (it is attested 23/60 times – the percentage

amounts to 38.33%), *impossible* (12 occurrences/60 – 20%), *not possible* (12 occurrences/60 – 20%), and *hard* (7 occurrences/60 – 11.66%).

Closer analysis reveals that this phraseology is frequently used for both negative assessments of specific theories:

- (1) Urton attempts to solve these problems by arguing that any given decimal khipu supported two readings, one numeric and one binary. *It is difficult to imagine how* these two functionally different yet materially isomorphic, overlapping semiotic systems could operate simultaneously on the same khipu. (Engl. HIBRA)

and for negative assessments of the reviewed book author's argument:

- (2) Without such examinations, however, *it is difficult to know* what to make of Lu's broadest arguments about how Old Shanghai's traditions helped to facilitate the city's new global status. (Engl. HIBRA)

Our data support the study by Hyland (2000: 61), which finds that "unlike research articles, outright criticism is not avoided in book reviews, indeed it is an integral feature of the genre, substantiating its claim to be a scholarly form of writing". Along the same lines, Giannoni (2002: 356) points out that "conflict is the common thread that holds this genre together". In explaining this finding, we cite evidence from our analysis, which shows that these adjectives frequently occur within the vicinity of some marker of counter-claims, such as *however*, *but*, *yet* so as to create pattern of contrast/conflict. This result provides a particularly clear illustration of the role of the reviewer as academic arguer.

- (3) Top-down planning on a large scale did, of course, occur during World Wars I and II. But the postwar reaction to the distended wartime state made it clear that Seeing Like a State Scott-style was an anomaly born of emergency conditions, and it found little nourishment in American cultural soil. Aside from wartime, the American state-led programs that come closest to Scott's high modernist model are the Interstate Highway System and NASA. *But*, for all their scale and cost, *it is difficult to see* either as an oppressive instance of top-down state planning. (Engl. HIBRA)

If we move to cross-cultural comparison, Italian HIBRA shows a different trend. The data reveal that 'validity' rather than 'difficulty' (where only 2 occurrences of the sequence *non è più possibile +inf.* occur) is the main meaning group in the corpus, with a frequency of 0.15 per 1,000 words in the patterns *verbo+AGG+che/infinito presente* in the whole corpus, followed by both 'desirability' and 'importance', showing a similar frequency (0.05 per 1,000 words). The analysis reveals that the most frequently occurring evaluative adjective in the *verbo+AGG+che* pattern is *vero* that is attested 13/22 times (59.09%). Interestingly, the data show that the 'validity' sequence *verbo+vero+che* often pairs a concessive clause with a counter-claim:

- (4) Ci sono però altri risvolti del panarabismo che vanno segnalati. AJ è causa ed effetto dell'individuazione di un bacino economico e politico di estrema rilevanza. *Forse non è del tutto corretto, come fa Della Ratta, affermare che* soltanto dalla seconda metà degli anni novanta nella regione si è iniziato a ragionare in termini di mercato. *È, però vero che* solo allora si sono create quelle condizioni sociali, politiche, economiche, che hanno permesso di fare del "popolo arabo" un mercato unico a tutti gli effetti, di grande interesse per i governi e per le imprese, per il suo potenziale politico e per la possibilità di sfruttare le economie di scala a livello distributivo. (It. HIBRA)

The examples indicate that, although there is a significant variation across the two comparable corpora in terms of parameters of evaluation (English HIBRA seems to privilege the notion of 'difficulty', whereas Italian HIBRA favours 'validity'), both English and Italian historical reviewers display a greater concern with long sequences of argumentative dialogue between the reviewed book author and themselves. From the point of view of the argumentative development of discourse in the genre, counter-claiming or pointing out gaps in existing research (including, of course, the book under discussion) contributes to representing the debate reviewers build not only with reviewed authors but also within the disciplinary area.

### 3.2 Focus on the patterns in English and Italian historical research article openings

As Table II shows, 'validity' is the dominant meaning for the patterns *it v-link ADJ that/ verbo+AGG+che* in the two comparable corpora of openings in both cultures. In the Italian corpus 'validity' is also the dominant meaning for the pattern *verbo+AGG+infinito presente*. In English openings, the 'validity' sequence *it is clear that* is the most frequent (is attested 8/19 times – 42.10%), followed by *it is (un)true that* (3/19 – 15.78%), confirming the findings by Biber *et al.* (1999: 672) in the *Longman Grammar*, who note that "*clear, (un)likely, (im)possible, true* are the four most common adjectival predicates controlling extraposed *that*-clauses in LSWE Corpus". In Italian openings, on the other hand, the 'validity' sequences *è vero che* and *è possibile+infinito presente* are the most frequent (*è vero che* is attested 4/7 times – 57.14%; *è possibile+infinito presente* 7/8 – 87.5%). These results point to the possibility of a common English and Italian pattern involving markers of epi-stemic stance (evaluators of truth, certainty or likelihood).

Cross-cultural comparison provides a particularly clear illustration of how English and Italian use the *it v-link ADJ that* and *verbo+AGG+infinito presente* patterns, respectively, to give two different types of 'validity' assessment, confirming the distinction made in Francis, Manning and Hunston (1998) between 'likely' and 'obvious':

- a) one providing evaluations based on appeals to *possibility/likelihood* that characterize the Italian corpus of openings:



- (5) Utilizzando una serie di testi che coprono un arco di tempo che va dall'XI al XX secolo, *è possibile osservare* la costante presenza di questo santo nella credenza popolare e la sua fortuna nel corso dei secoli. (It. Openings)

b) the other based on evidence and appealing to notions of *obviousness* that characterize the English corpus of openings:

- (6) [...] On Crimes and Punishments appealed alike to sovereigns, statesmen and philosophes. In this regard, the work held great importance for the English intellectual environment, where Beccaria's arguments drew wide and sustained acknowledgement from many sections of society. This is not to say that criticism of English penal practice and theory was unheard of before Beccaria's work appeared. There are many examples of criticism being levelled both at the practices of English punishment and at the principles which supported them before 1764. *Nevertheless, it is clear that* the work was eagerly adopted, *most obviously* by lawyers and the rising middle classes, as a declaration of the fundamental principles that ought to underpin the application of the penal sanction in an 'improved' civilisation. (Engl. Openings)

If we consider (6) above, where the use of the contrastive connector *nevertheless* signals a counter-claim, allowing the writer to show contrast and signalling his opinion, we can see that in the research article opening, as Bondi (2007b) puts it, the writer is not only involved in interpreting historical sequence events, but in dialogically arguing a claim, so as to place it in the context of a debate, signalling the importance of his/her interpretation, rather than that of the subject matter.

### 3.3 A lexical case study: the lemma *surprise* in English

Further reflections on cross-cultural analysis can be offered by studying the concordances of selected lexical elements. The choice of the lemma to be analysed falls on *surprise* (i.e. *it is not surprising that, it is not a surprise that, surprisingly*).

When we analyse the evaluative adjectives used in the patterns across the two cultures, we find that most of them are equivalent (i.e. *true/vero, possible/possibile, clear/chiaro* etc.). But this is not the case of *surprising* that occurs only in the two English corpora, with a frequency of 0.12 per 1,000 words in HIBRA corpus and 0.11 in English Openings.

Both genres show a preference for negative polarity (*not surprising, no surprise, not surprisingly*), constituting 73.68% of all occurrences of the lemma *surprise* in the whole corpora (28 occurrences/38 occurrences) against 26.31% showing positive polarity (10 occurrences/38).

- (7) The list of Butterfield's accomplishments and services to the field is so long that *it is perhaps not surprising that* he is generally also believed to have founded the Cambridge history of science committee, the body in whose activities the institutionalization of the subject at Cambridge is ultimately rooted. (Engl. Openings)

- (8) *It is no surprise that* those of us who make it our business to study the distant past should dwell so obsessively upon the written word. Written texts, after all, are far and away our most abundant resource for understanding the long defunct people and societies that constitute the subject of our investigations. (Engl. Openings)
- (9) *Not surprisingly*, books in these two categories differ from each other markedly on such basis issues as the influence of imperialism on China's modern history. What must be stressed, *however*, is that [...] (Engl. HIBRA)

As can be seen, the main function of the various modalizations of the lemma *surprise* is that of highlighting the expectedness of the statement in itself as in (7); it also, however, predicts that the obvious nature of the statement will lead to further elaboration or explanation that may be derived from it as in (8) and also contrasts sequences as in (9).

The adjective *surprising* is also used to indicate a gap in the literature, by emphasizing it. An illustration is provided in example (10).

- (10) *It is rather surprising here that* a chronology of urbanization is not clearly related to a similar chronology of economic history. For example, *little* is made of the past role and heritage of the oil industry, of the military, both U.S. Navy and armaments industry, and of L.A. (Engl. HIBRA)

On the whole, such results support Bondi and Mazzi's (2007) view that markers of (un)expectedness are crucial in English academic discourse. In terms of writer's positioning, they observe, "markers of (un)expectedness can be used meta-discursively to signal 'engagement', i.e. resources by which the author negotiates (engages with) the various convergent or conflicting positions activated in the text" (2007: 131).

One interesting question still unanswered is why no Italian equivalent of *surprising* occurs in the Italian corpora. We would presume the persuasive intent of reviewers and researchers is the same in both cultures, yet obviously their strategies for convincing readers of the plausibility of their interpretations may differ.

#### 4. Conclusions

The brief overview of academic phraseology across genres and cultures has shown that the evaluative meaning associations with the two grammar patterns *it is/was ADJ that* and *it is/was ADJ to-inf.* and their Italian equivalents vary across the four corpora studied here.

We have seen that in historical book review articles parameters of evaluation in the two patterns under examination are different across the two cultures. On the whole, the English corpus privileges the notion of 'difficulty', that is frequently used for negative assessments. English reviewers present themselves as struggling to be both appropriately critical and fair. The Italian corpus, on the other hand, favours 'validity'. Italian reviewers predominantly use these patterns to assess the validity of the reviewed

book author's ideas of the historical record.

Both English and Italian writers in historical research article openings, in contrast, show a greater concern with 'validity'. Italian historians tend to provide evidence on notions of 'likelihood', while writers in English on notions of 'obviousness'.

We have attempted to show how the patterns under investigation contribute to the construction of the reviewer's or researcher's argumentative position, in a way that, though apparently impersonal, you can discern their voices. This seems to confirm Murphy's (2004: 219) remark that "it is largely impossible for a writer to remain in the background [...] and what appears to be impersonal is merely a mask which the writer soon sheds".

In both corpora of book review articles and openings, history is placed under discussion within a disciplinary debate: both reviewers and writers interpret historical events and argue their claims in a debate within the discourse community.

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